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Continued

CHAPTER XXI

Morning.

COLLIE, coming from the bunk house, glanced up and saw Black Boyar standing alone where his own pony had stood. This was not an invitation; this was daring him to follow.

He rode into the canyon, half-conscious of Yuma's tracks ahead of him. He rode past the tracks as they swerved toward a grassy level near the stream.

"Collie!"

Louise stood beside the sweating Yuma, patting the pony's neck. Collie raised his eyebrows.

Louise was bareheaded. The clear morning sunlight enhanced her rich coloring. Against the misty gray of the canyon wall her head, in profile as she stood beside the horse, was as delicately beautiful as that vision that imagination knows full well, but may seldom realize.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Collie, don't say anything but that. You look awfully grim. Surely not because I took Yuma."

"No. Only I was afraid for you."

"So you followed at breakneck speed to rescue the timorous, the despairing, and so forth?"

"I can't joke like that this morning."

"Why? I'm here, safe enough. Had breakfast?"

"Yes. I wanted to see you about something, Louise."

"All right. But you are so unnaturally tall and severe and judicial sitting there on Bazar. You look almost funereal. Please get down. Roll a cigarette and act natural. I'm not going to scold you, sir."

"I wish you would."

"Why? What have you been doing that makes you look so ashamed of yourself? Tell me!"

"I didn't know I was."

"You don't act naturally. Is there something about me that is different? Is that it?"

"No. I wish you were different sometimes."

"You do?"

"No," he said quietly. "I don't wish you were different. I want to remember you like you are."

"To remember me?"

"Yes," he whispered, "to remember you."

He seemed to see regret, astonishment, questioning, gentle reproach, even a hint of amusement-faith-appeal. But her expression changed instantly. "I think you have something to remember me by—something you asked me for once, long ago. Lend it to you. You have never spoken of it—acknowledged it. I can't quite forgive that."

"Your glove. I know. Lend it here. And he touched his breast. "I thought you would understand."

"I do. But, Collie, a girl—equalizes to be told that she is understood, even when she knows it."

"I was going to write about getting your glove at the hospital. I guess I was too tired."

"At the hospital?"

"Yes. Red sent it to me. Brand gave it to him to give to me—that time."

"Oh!" And Louise felt like retracting a little; but, sweetly perverse, she obeyed her instinct. "Collie, do you realize that I have already asked you to dismount? Shall I have to ask you again? Do you realize that I am standing while you are sitting your horse?"

"I am begging your pardon, Louise."

The girl noticed brightly, smiling as she noticed the little scar on his chin, a wound that she had made him blush for when she had admonished him for fighting with Dick Tenlow.

She watched the rise and fall of the muscles of his arm beneath his flannel shirt as he lit his cigarette. How broad chested and strong and whole some he seemed in the morning sunlight! There was an untamed grace about his movements, his gestures, which, together with his absolute unconsciousness of self, pleased and attracted her.

"Yuma is a little wild, but she is a fine saddle pony. I'm really jealous for Boyar's prestige."

"I was afraid for you to ride her," said Collie.

"She behaves beautifully."

"Would you take her as a kind of present from me?" he asked.

"Give Yuma to me? I thought you loved her."

"I do. That's why I want you to have her."

"He would give you away," said Louise, stroking Yuma's neck. "Give you away just as you're learning to trust him and perhaps even like him a little—and he says he loves you! Let's run away from him, hummingbird!"

"I think I could stand it if you would just be mean once," said Collie.

"Stand what, Collie?"

He had been watching her shapely hand and supple, rounded wrist as she stroked the pony's neck. Swiftly she turned from the horse and faced him.

"What, Collie?" There was laughter in her eyes, a laughter that challenged more than her serious mood. Her lips

were smiling. Her chin was tilted provocatively.

His eyes grew wide with unspoken love, unuttered longing. He delighted in the delicious curve of her cheek and of her arm resting on the saddle. Her pulse had an inexplicable suggestion of royal courage, as though she were battling for more than her lips could utter. In her absence he had adored

her. Now he forgot all that he had meant to tell her in the conscious delight of her mere presence. But even that was not enough. He dropped the pony's reins and strode toward her. Louise paled even as she drew near, but he saw nothing but her eyes and her lips—lips that curved wistfully, provoking tenderness and love. For an instant Louise held her heart aloof.

"Let me just worship you—a little while—a little while," he whispered.

"Only a little while!" she breathed, and the soft rose glowed in her cheeks.

"Just forever," he said.

And Louise Lacharme, more beautiful than the morning—Louise, his most gracious senorita, his Madonna of the Rose—lifted her arms to him. Her lips quivered like a child's, tremulous with longing to tell him silently, as his lips found hers, all that her heart was giving and all the wealth of love it yet should give.

Gently his hands clasped her golden head. His whole being thrilled as he touched her hair, her cheeks, her lips. "Oh, Collie, Collie, love me always!" she whispered. And she drew him down to her breast and murmured little endearments and sweet, broken words of love.

Moonstone canyon, coldly beautiful, echoed the hoof beats of the ponies as they walked homeward.

Louise turned in the saddle. "Collie," she said with an indescribable gesture of appeal, "you will always take care of me, won't you?"

"My Rose Girl, why do you say that?"

"I was thinking of my father."

Louise saw his lips stiffen and his chin lift. "Louise, I had no right just now—I haven't any right—I'm poor. The claim wasn't ours."

"I didn't mean that," she said, smiling wistfully. "But you will always care for me, won't you? I don't care one bit about the claim. It has made trouble and sorrow enough. I can't remember my father. I can hardly think of him as my father. But it is horrible to think of his dying for water because he cared so much for gold."

"But how did you know?"

"I know," she answered gravely. "And I know that you are a very, very foolish boy not to trust your friends more than you do. Did you suppose you would be happier or better in leaving Moonstone ranch? Did you suppose I would be happier? Collie, you have so much to learn."

"I guess that's so," he sighed. Then his eyes brightened with his old time mischief. "Couldn't you begin now to teach me a little—like back there in the canyon?"

And, being of a decisive habit of mind, he rode close to Louise and claimed immediate and delicious instruction.

"But how did you know," he asked again, "about the claim and your father and me?"

"A secret that I share with Overland," she replied.

"So he told you? When? Not last night. He was asleep when I came away this morning."

"So he is here, then?"

"Louise, you're joking. Didn't Red

"No."

"And you know all about it already?"

He looked at her curiously for a moment.

"Can't I have another one, Rose Girl?"

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